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A NEW CONCEPTION OF VIOLENCE

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ABSTRACT

The prevailing definition of violence is one which is fundamentally subjective, allowing that acts be defined in innumerable ways. This definition neither provides individuals with a usable guide by which to understand violence nor is functionally the manner in which our society actually defines violence. The obstacles and consequences created by the existence of such a blurry understanding of violence are numerous. Scholars must begin to understand that acts of violence, though often quite identical, are assigned different meanings. Instead of continuing to study violence using its assigned meanings, scholars must pursue instead the basis of these assigned meanings. This can only be done if violence is investigated as a phenomenon which is objectively definable—that is, definable by actions.
A NEW CONCEPTION OF VIOLENCE

The concept of violence is both complex and confusing. It is a phenomenon which is presently barely definable and instead, must be constantly interpreted. The prevailing definition of violence is one which is fundamentally subjective, allowing that acts be defined in innumerable ways. This definition neither provides individuals with a usable guide by which to understand violence nor is functionally the manner in which our society actually defines this phenomenon. The obstacles and consequences created by the existence of such a blurry perception of violence are numerous.

Our subjective understanding of violence does not suffice in creating a viable and useful guideline by which to study the phenomenon of violence. Any act which is designated violent by the researcher will not be understood to be violent by some individuals. No act is ever universally agreed to be violent. Thus, an analysis of violence as subjectively understood will be misleading and therefore, disadvantageous.

Violence must be examined in new ways. I propose that violence be examined as a phenomenon which is defined on the basis of tangible actions—that is, be objectively definable. Such an understanding of violence would be a radical shift in the way we perceive violence, creating a phenomenon comprised of many additional acts, including those which are presently controversial and those which have never been examined under the heading of violence. Thus, violence will no longer be defined by its morality or immorality.
Such a proposition may make some readers wary. However, I am not proposing that the society begin to understand violence as a phenomenon which is wholly divorced from morality. Such a notion is neither realistic nor would be sufficiently beneficial. Rather, I suggest that violence be divorced from morality for the purpose of study. Morality is wholly subjective, understood by individuals in countless ways. As such, a study of violence as morally defined is not even possible, for whatever acts are designated as violent will be controversial.

On the other hand, an examination of violence as it is objectively defined would be extremely valuable in furthering our understanding of this phenomenon. We must begin to understand that acts of violence, though often quite identical, are assigned different meanings. Instead of continuing to study violence using its assigned meanings, we must pursue instead the basis for such meanings. Such an investigation can only be executed if violence is examined as a phenomenon which is objectively-defined.

Further, an understanding of violence as an objective phenomenon will aid us in understanding the various ways that we use physical harm. Once we have begun to notice and examine all such uses of physical harm, we can then begin to examine the reasons that we use these forms of violence. We will then be capable of understanding how acts of physical harm function in our society, which could assist our comprehension of why some acts are socially proscribed while others are sanctioned.

When we have begun to determine these various factors which form our understanding of violence, we might then be able to understand why acts of proscribed violence exist so prevalently. It is my belief that the existence of proscribed violence has never been understood because we have never conducted an adequate study of violence.
We have only studied violence as it has been arbitrarily defined; that is, by simply investigating certain acts of physical harm which were deemed to be violent. Thus, we have never understood that physical harm is a prevalent component of our society. The study of an objectively definable violence has significant implications for broadening our comprehension of this phenomenon.

For the purposes of this paper, only physical violence will be examined. Though the existence and effects of sexual, economic, psychological, and social violence are important and should be investigated, they will not be included in this paper. Thus, the term “violence” will only refer to physical violence.

Physical violence will be limited to only that violence which is performed by humans on other humans. Thus, physical violence against animals will not be considered though its inclusion would likely be quite beneficial to an investigation of how our society understands violence.

This paper will only examine the phenomenon of violence as it pertains to the United States. Thus, the beliefs, histories, and views of other peoples will not be considered. As such, the term “Americans” will only refer to those persons who live in the United States, with the terms “us” and “we” referring only to Americans.

Further, this understanding of violence will be used with regard to Emile Durkheim’s concept of collective conscience. The collective conscience are “ideas which are shared by members of a society. They are collective in the sense that no one individual knows or possesses all of these ideas; it is only the entire collection of individuals that knows or possesses all of them” (Ritzer 2003: 16-17).
Under Durkheimian thought, the United States falls under the classification of a modern society, which is characterized by organic solidarity. Such societies are defined by their diverse groups and moral codes:

People are still constrained by moral rules, but...modern forms of democracy allow the individual more choice and freedom...Durkheim contends that the collective conscious of modern society is based on the cult of the individual where ideas must be open to human activity and interpretation (Tacker 2002: 141).

Thus, when referring to the collective opinions or beliefs, I will be referring to the collective conscience of American society. Therefore, the statements presented will not apply to, or be believed by, all individuals. However, they will refer both to beliefs of the majority and the beliefs by which our society actually functions.

Certain terms will be used throughout the paper which may be unfamiliar to the reader. The working definitions of these terms will be defined as follows: the term “nonnormative violence” will refer to those forms of violence that are socially proscribed, or forbidden, by the society. Such acts include murder, rape, and torture. “Normative violence” will refer to acts of violence that are socially sanctioned, or permissible. These include such acts as capital punishment, spanking, and sports violence.

Physical violence has been commonly defined as physical harm motivated by hostile intent. It is qualified with such terms as destructive, untamed, unjust, abuse, vehemence, and intensity (The American 2002). Each of these terms is negative in implication. As such, violence is understood negatively. Further, violence tends to be implicitly understood as being comprised of those acts which are immoral. Thus, acts of physical harm which are socially proscribed are identified as violence. Under this
definition, it is determined that one is violent if their physical harm is motivated by the malicious desire to harm another person. It is the motivation, not the act itself, which determines violence.

Initially, such a definition seems direct and easily comprehensible. Frequently, it seems that one needs only to look into the eyes of the perpetrators to determine whether their action is depraved or virtuous and need only glance at the victim to determine whether their pain is just or unjust. Glimpsing the act should be sufficient to determine whether it is moral or immoral.

However, the complexity of these situations quickly becomes apparent. For instance, how should an act be defined when a child is struck by their parent in public? Numerous questions come to mind. How young was the child? How hard did the parent hit? Why did the parent hit their child? Was the parent unduly angry? Was the hitting excessive? These clarifying questions illustrate the complexity that is inherent when one tries to classify an act as violent. The very nature of these questions reveals that their answers will be varied. Thus, people will describe the same act in numerous ways.

Primarily, it is clear that many clarifying questions will frequently remain unanswered. It is often extremely difficult for a bystander to ascertain the motivation of someone who is committing violence; without this knowledge, the witness will remain fundamentally unsure as to how the act should be classified. Often, the witnessing of an act of physical violence takes place in a vacuum, without an informative context. To continue investigating the example above, was the parent being abusive or was the child hit because they were misbehaving? Usually, this question cannot be answered. Thus,
one will be unable to ascertain whether the hitting was motivated by hostility and consequently will not be able to ascertain whether violence was occurring.

Though other clarifying questions will occasionally be answered, these answers will be subjective, and subsequently, subjectively interpreted. How hard did the parent hit? It depends on who you ask. And, according to that answer, was it too hard? It depends on who is judging. And finally, should this specific instance of hitting be defined as violent? Here, a multitude of answers will abound.

The spanking of children is an increasingly controversial issue in our contemporary society. “Sixty-five percent of Americans approve of spanking children, a rate that has been steady since 1990” (Crandall 2004). The American public holds disparate beliefs about how hard a child can be hit, at what age, and with how much anger. Some believe that hitting children is violence in itself; others believe that parents hold an absolute power and would not define any disciplinary action by a parent as violent, while those in between take their respective and numerous places along the spectrum. Thus, it can be seen that violence is not so effortlessly defined.

Further, it is interesting to note that in this contemporary period the majority of Americans believe that the parent is the only one who possesses the legitimate authority to punish a child using physical force. This has not always been the case. Only 30 years ago corporal punishment was a common practice in America’s school system, with just two states banning the custom (Maeroff 1972). Both teachers and school authorities had the legal right to hit their pupils for misbehaving and regularly employed this form of discipline. Today however,

just 26 percent [of Americans] say grade-school teachers should be allowed to spank kids at school... even among adults who spank their own child, 67 percent say grade-school teachers should not be permitted to spank children at school” (Crandall 2004).
Thus, what was once widely acceptable only half a century ago is deemed to be violent in contemporary America.

Parents are now the only authority popularly supported in the right of corporal punishment, but even this support has decreased considerably in the last 50 years. In the 1950s, 99% of Americans supported corporal punishment by parents; even in 1975, the support was at 97% (Strauss, Sugarman, and Giles-Slims 1997). Today, that support is only at 65%. Thus, acts are given new meaning throughout time. Beliefs about the parental right for corporal punishment are now competing with recently-developed ideas about the rights of a child. The belief stating that the act of a parent disciplining their child is not violent now competes with the view that when a child is physically harmed by their parents, it is a violent act. Thus, the phenomenon is beginning to be framed in a different way than it has been historically. How we determine violence is now being strongly affected by ideas about the child, while the focus on the parent is decreasing.

Many identical acts of violence have elicited quite different moral reactions throughout our history, suggesting that it is not the act itself, but the particular response to that act which determines whether it is to be considered violent.

Thus, human beings attribute meaning to actions. This reality is the focus of the phenomenological branch of sociology which studies how people define their social situations (Farganis 2000: 234). These scholars seek to “analyze the society and its structures to ascertain how it has come to be what it is” (Wallace and Wolf 1997: 234). Though each individual finds social reality already constructed and is thus, provided with certain ways to think about it, this reality was itself a construction, created by individuals (Wallace and Wolf 1997: 254-256). Further, society is constantly changing and is
therefore continuously understood in new and different ways. Thus, individuals continually assign new meaning to actions.

Social reality can only be understood as a creation and therefore, we must understand that humans attribute meaning to actions. The radical potential of this notion is that once people discern that their social institutions are created, they will have the ability to consciously reconstruct them.

The reality that individuals assign meaning to actions can be easily demonstrated when one continues to investigate the development of our views on acts of violence. The view of spousal violence has changed considerably in the course of our country’s history. In the late 1700s, founding father James Wilson said of marriage: “The most important consequence of marriage is, that the husband and the wife become, in law, only one person: the legal existence of the wife is consolidated into that of the husband” (West 1997). Thus, for many years women had no rights of redress in their marriages. In fact, only in the 1850s did several states in America began to liberalize their divorce laws. As a result, women could now obtain a divorce based on marital cruelty. However, the laws were restrictive in that the violence had to be severe and meet the courts standards of “legal cruelty.” Thus, not all instances of physical violence were considered abuse. According to these laws, the abuse had to be habitual, life threatening and could not have been provoked by the “wife's misbehavior.” In addition, Maryland passed the first law that declared domestic assault a punishable crime in 1882 (Women's 2002).

Therefore, because of a particular view of both marriage and the woman, it was permissible for a husband to use physical harm against his wife. Only extreme forms of physical harm were deemed violent and impermissible; therefore, the traditional or standard forms of physical harm were a socially sanctioned phenomenon in the marriage. Thus, many acts of physical harm were not regarded as violent, as reflected in America’s laws.
Today, there are myriad domestic violence laws to protect a spouse from an abusive marriage. Abusive partners are now regularly sentenced to prison terms and most Americans consider domestic abuse to be a definitively violent act. Thus, the same act has been given a completely contrary reaction.

Marital rape has undergone the same transformation in meaning. At one time there was not even the suggestion that marital rape was violent. However, today it is beginning to be accepted as a form of prosecutable violence. Sociologists who studied this phenomenon in the early 1980s found that it is a common phenomenon, occurring more than twice as often as rape by a stranger. Further, they found that the women who were casualties of this form of physical harm reflected society’s confusion about recognizing forced sex in a marriage as a form of rape. [Said sociologist Dr. Yilo]: ‘many women described to me very brutal sexual assaults committed by their husbands over periods of years and yet they did not realize that the rape label could apply to something in their marriage’” (Collins 1982).

Thus, the act of harmful forced sex is perceived differently if it is perpetrated by a husband than if committed by a stranger. Thus, the same act, producing the same results, can be both violent and nonviolent depending the circumstances. The act is assigned meaning relevant to the perpetrator.

In 1982, only 11 states “recognized the rape of a wife by a cohabiting husband as a prosecutable offense” (Collins 1982). Though marital rape is now illegal in all 50 states, it continues to be an indistinctly perceived phenomenon by individuals. However, there has been a continuing shift in the way we understand this act.

In 1982, Dr. Yilo provided a telling statement when explaining why she believed that marital rape should be criminalized:
It won’t stop it, but it would have symbolic importance. It might make husbands aware that it’s not simply a case of ‘getting a little tough with their wives,’ but that it is a form of rape. It would say that we as a society don’t condone such behavior (Collins 1982).

Thus, Dr. Kilo recognized that once an act is defined a certain way, it will be reacted to in a certain way. If one changes the definition of an act, the understanding and thus, the response, to that act will be different. Thus, even if abusive men do not stop raping their wives, they would have a different understanding of martial rape because of the way their society now defines the action.

This indicates that we understand violence as a subjective phenomenon. We do not categorize violence as specific concrete actions that can be objectively verified. Thus, two people viewing the same event often will define the event in contradictory ways—one classifying it as violence while the other deeming that it is not. Because the definition of violence has no clear boundaries we are forced to define it individually, creating violence to be a matter of individual opinion. Thus, violence becomes a subjective phenomenon.

A subjective definition of violence produces violence to be ultimately subjective. It creates a phenomenon whereby certain actions are acceptable in certain circumstances. For example, in our society it is acceptable to hit if the hitting is done with specific positive intentions. A parent can hit to correct or punish; a police officer can hit if it is necessary to control; all are allowed to hit if it is done in self-defense, or often, even to protect someone else.

Killing is also acceptable in certain circumstances. One is allowed to kill in self-defense or, in some cases, to protect another. Though they are somewhat controversial acts, killing is acceptable in both the death penalty and the act of war.
The act of war and our views concerning it are full of extremely important implications about the way we understand violence. However, I will regrettably not be able to explore this phenomenon in the course of this thesis. Rather, I will focus on Americans’ understanding of the death penalty.

While most industrialized nations have banned the death penalty, deeming its violence impermissible, the United States continues to employ capital punishment with the current support of 74% of her citizens (Jones 2003). Thus, the acts comprising the death penalty are assigned different meanings throughout the world.

In America, the death penalty is justified on the dual basis of protection and punishment. It is perceived by many to be protecting a vulnerable society from an offender who has transgressed the laws of the state beyond an acceptable boundary. By killing this criminal, it is believed that others will be dissuaded from committing similar crimes. Thus, killing the criminal is thought to deter violence.

The second reason that many Americans state in their support of capital punishment is that the criminal’s offense is considered to be so serious that their death is the only fitting punishment. Thus, the criminal is being punished for their actions. However, this punishment is not rehabilitative; thus, the criminal is given no chance to learn from it. This, the ultimate punishment, is defended on the basis of numerous beliefs. The criminal, believed to be beyond rehabilitation, is destroyed.

Mitt Romney, current governor of Massachusetts, is calling for a reinstatement of capital punishment in his state. Romney believes that capital punishment can deter -- can “save a life or two.” A second reason [Romney supports reinstatement] is that he believes there are crimes so heinous that only capital punishment can express -- and by expressing, reinforce -- society’s proportionate revulsion (Will 2004).
The logic may follow, but the tactics used to kill capital offenders read like a page from a horror story. Were they used in other circumstances—by an individual against another individual, for example—they would almost assuredly be viewed as impermissible violence.

America currently employs five methods by which to put someone to death: lethal injection, hanging, the electric chair, the firing squad, and the gas chamber. Lethal injection, a method initially used in 1982, is the most benevolent of the five as the condemned is unconscious when the poison enters their bloodstream. Hanging and the firing squad, the two oldest methods, kill the prisoner by snapping the neck or piercing the heart with a bullet, respectively.

The gas chamber and the electric chair are fairly recently-acquired forms of capital punishment. The gas chamber was introduced in 1924. In this form of death, the prisoner is strapped to a chair in an airtight chamber and then suffocates as hydrogen cyanide gas is administered (Death 2004):

The prisoner is instructed to breathe deeply to speed up the process. Most prisoners, however, try to hold their breath, and some struggle. The inmate does not lose consciousness immediately. According to former San Quentin, California, Penitentiary warden, Clifton Duffy, ‘At first there is evidence of extreme horror, pain, and strangling. The eyes pop. The skin turns purple and the victim begins to drool’” (Death 2004).

The electric chair is probably the most controversial of the methods as it has been the victim of several infamous malfunctions. Initially used in 1890, this method also positions the blindfolded prisoner in a chair to which they are fastened, preventing excessive movement (Death 2004). “A metal skullcap-shaped electrode is attached to the scalp and forehead over a sponge moistened with saline,” (Death 2004) and then a jolt of between 500 and 2000 volts, lasting for about 30 seconds, is administered. Sometimes
the heart is still beating, and then another jolt must be administered. Supreme Court Justice William Brennan described an electric chair execution as follows:

...the prisoner’s eyeballs sometimes pop out and rest on [his] cheeks. The prisoner often defecates, urinates, and vomits blood and drool. The body turns bright red as its temperature rises, and the prisoner's flesh swells and his skin stretches to the point of breaking (Death 2004).

My purpose in providing such graphic details was not to persuade the reader as to the “brutality” of these forms of capital punishment. Rather, I explore these details to assess the reactions to such acts. The details that compose these acts, thus, must be fully understood.

The reality is that the methods used in capital punishment would be deemed impermissible by most Americans if performed, for example, by a stranger on his victim. However, performed by the state on convicted felons, these acts are permissible and are, in fact, rarely considered to be violent by their supporters. Thus, even the acts described above can be understood as nonviolent.

It is interesting to note that what was once one of the most detestable components of the Holocaust has now become an acceptable method of capital punishment in the United States. Using the same name, the “gas chamber” continues to produce the identical form of death it was once so fiercely condemned for. Perhaps we did not reject the method of death, as we so imagined, but rather, those on whom it was performed.

Though this rationale may be logical, it is in fact the same justification used by the Nazis used during the Holocaust. Without question, the Nazis did not simply kill indiscriminately. It can be plausibly assumed that compliant Caucasian Germans were not killed because they were deemed worthy of life. Thus, the death of such people by
the gas chamber would have been an equally appalling proposition. The gas chamber was only permissible because those who were gassed deserved it.

The same statement could be made to describe the way many Americans think about the use of the gas chamber. This being the case, it must be understood that whatever the specific feature chosen to specify the group that is deemed deserving of such a death, the reality is that it is a subjective reason.

The methods of capital punishment currently employed in the United States exist for the sole purpose of producing an intentional death. They are a not a means to an end, but rather, a decisive end in themselves. Why, then, are these acts permissible? What are our justifications for using them? Let us look again at the reasoning that is used to justify capital punishment.

The first states that the use of capital punishment will deter crime. This argument appeals to the functionality of capital punishment. However, this hypothesis has been shown to be erroneous through extensive research. Perhaps the results of this research have simply not been made known to most Americans, and if it were to become known, support for the death penalty would decrease significantly. Interestingly, however, this is not the case. Researchers Phoebe C. Ellsworth and Samuel R. Gross sought to answer this hypothesis and found that

most proponents would still favor the death penalty if life imprisonment were and equally effective deterrent, and most opponents would still oppose it even if it were a "much more effective" deterrent than life imprisonment. The same hypothetical question was added to the Gallup Poll in 1985, with very similar results (1994: 27).

Thus, the belief in deterrence is not a fundamental motivation for Americans’ support of capital punishment. Rather, polls show that “most Americans think of death as an
expressive rather than a pragmatic punishment” (Anderson 1988). Thus, Americans’ views on the death penalty are not grounded on its functionality.

Instead, they are given an almost opposite focus: our views about the death penalty are symbolic in nature. The subject of this symbolism focuses on death. Americans’ understanding of the death penalty rest on the question of whether it is justifiable to kill someone for their crime. Because we understand violence as an impermissible form of physical harm, our respective opinions about the death penalty rest on whether we believe the death penalty is a violent act.

Thus, those Americans who defend the death penalty rest heavily on the second justification for support. This argument states that the criminal’s offense is considered to be so serious that the only fitting punishment is their death. In other words, the criminal is believed to be beyond rehabilitation and thus, must be destroyed. In essence, such logic states that the condemned deserve such arduous deaths.

A Texas officer of the court had the following view: “Some people, he felt, just need to be killed. ‘Personally, I think there are some cases that, even if we had that rule [of life imprisonment], that we ought not to support these slugs for the rest of their lives’” (Tolson 2001).

Similarly, in 1871 Judge Bedford Charles Barbender provided the following justification for sentencing a man to death, declaring that “the villain who could perpetrate such an act is no longer fit to live and associate with his fellow human beings” (A Heavy 1871).

No longer a benevolent motivation, the permissibility of this justification demonstrates that even when hostile intent is the motivating factor, the act can still be
deemed nonviolent. But on what basis? Isn’t the very definition of violence an act of physical harm which is motivated by hostile intent?

It becomes interesting to note that when a “benevolently motivated” physical harm is justified, it is the specific harm itself that becomes justified in our minds. We have all witnessed a war that was supported by the majority of our society. We understood that people were being killed and may have even viewed such events on television; however, we viewed these acts in light of the understanding that the majority believed them to be beneficial. Thus war, as a phenomenon, gains credibility.

Subsequently this act, possessing credibility, begins to be understood as a credible act in itself. Because it becomes a credible act, it then can be justified by reasoning which is hostile. It is this ironic twist that allows even acts which are described by the definition of violence to be considered nonviolent, allowing even malicious intent to become an acceptable justification. Thus, the definition of violence becomes so subjective that an action, described perfectly by its definition, cannot be called violent. It becomes so subjective that the definition of violence, “Physical harm motivated by hostile intent,” is functionally unable to define any actions. Thus, this subjective definition of violence produces violence to be an ultimately subjective phenomenon, lacking all boundaries and any descriptive quality.

This subjective definition makes socially proscribed violence more likely to occur. Lacking definitive boundaries, violence cannot be collectively understood. As a result, the individual is left to define violence on their own. Employing a logical understanding of the factors that constitute violence, individuals often arrive at different conclusions than their society as to what should be deemed appropriate. Many acts
which are considered violent by a society are understood to be nonviolent by the individuals who are employing them.

Our society does not define physical violence on the basis of general categories of actions or motivations; rather, violence is identified through the naming of specific proscribed acts. Thus, though a specific act is sanctioned, this act cannot be understood as the basis for understanding nonviolent acts. Many individuals do not recognize this and instead believe that violence is a phenomenon which can be understood on the basis of how other acts are defined. Most individuals do not understand that our social understanding of violence is not logical, but arbitrary, and seek instead to derive a logical understanding of violence from these specific acts.

For example, many individuals stray from acts which are deemed socially acceptable because they understand violence on the basis of motivation. If their action is motivated by good will, they understand it to be nonviolent, though it may in fact be deemed violent by the society. Exorcisms can be understood in these terms.

While most exorcisms do not involve an intentional infliction of physical harm on the subject of the exorcism, some have involved a significant degree of deliberate physical harm. It is these exorcisms that I will examine. In 1980, a New York City woman tried to exorcise her infant son by pouring scalding water on his body and then subsequently placing him in a heated oven. She later showed no remorse for her actions and was instead described by police as “calm and lucid.” This exorcism was performed with the consent of the woman’s 56-year-old mother, who was in attendance. Both women were described as normal people by their neighbors (Rule 1980).
In another incident a Rhode Island man ruptured his mother-in-law’s esophagus when he jammed two crucifixes down her throat during an exorcism. This act occurred while “relatives watched and prayed” (Woman Wounded 1996). In a third case, a 17 year old New York teenager was suffocated to death by her mother during an exorcism (Fountain 2000).

Though they continue to constitute a definitive minority, more Americans believe in the validity of exorcisms today than they did 40 years ago, according to sociologist Michael W. Cuneo. This renewed faith is reflected in the increased number of both exorcists and exorcisms within the last 10 years (Fountain 2000).

Many who believe in the reality of demons and choose to employ physical harm during an exorcism understand these acts as nonviolent. They are not motivated by a malicious intent to harm the individual; rather, they are motivated by the desire to exorcise the demon and thus, benefit the individual. “Every exorcist must engage in a one-to-one confrontation, personal and bitter, with pure evil. Once engaged, the exorcism cannot be called off. There will and must always be a victor and a vanquished” (Martin 1976). Thus, the act’s greater meaning alters the understanding of the physical harm. The victim isn’t being injured; she’s being exorcised. The injurious harm is not an act in itself; instead, it is seen in context, and viewed in light of, that context.

Violence is often interpreted differently by individuals than by the society as a whole. It is therefore unrealistic to believe that all those who participate in violent exorcisms are bizarre or insane; rather, one must understand that the majority of these individuals are simply ordinary people who have a different understanding of the circumstances which comprise their situation and thus, of violence itself.
As can be seen from the cases illustrated above, all of these acts were performed on the individual by members of their own family. It is reasonable to believe that such individuals would not intentionally inflict such harm on their loved one; rather, their actions were done with the intent to help. One can plausibly assume this because these acts were performed in the presence of others who also believed in their necessity, permissibility, and constructive potential. Further, those who perpetrated the acts were not remorseful, instead believing in the necessity of their actions. Consequently, although these individuals are members of our society and have likely had exposure to its law system, they did not believe that their actions were violent.

However, our laws do not make exceptions for such understandings of violence. Acts of physical harm which are executed during an exorcism are impermissible. These acts are considered to be violent and are punishable. Thus, the society does not understand the interpretation of the individual and instead reacts by, as with the first two events described above, charging these individuals with assault and ordering them to undergo psychiatric examinations.

Most Americans also do not believe in the validity of exorcisms and thus, will describe as violent the acts of physical harm that comprise an exorcism. For them, these acts are not viewed within the context of some greater meaning; thus, there is nothing to alter the way these individuals view the acts of physical harm. It is only the actions that are seen.

Thus, the individual has defined violence differently than the society. Because their act was motivated with the intent to serve the subject of the exorcism, it was not understood to be violent. In fact, according to the dictionary definition of violence, these
acts cannot be understood as violence. They were not motivated by hostile intent, as required by the definition of violence. Thus, it can be shown that our society actually functions by a different understanding of violence than its standard definition.

What can account for these dissimilar understandings of violence? I would suggest that when the individual commits an act of intentional physical harm, they are more logical than the society in their understanding of violence. Individuals often understand their acts to be violent or nonviolent on the basis of their motivation. Society's designation of violent acts tends to be significantly more arbitrary.

Functionally, our society does not define violence as acts which are motivated by hostile intent. Rather in contrast, there are many acts-such as exorcisms-that are not motivated by hostile intent but which are considered violent by our society. Furthermore, there are many acts which are sometimes motivated by hostile intent-such as capital punishment or war-that are not regarded to be violent by our society.

Some believe that our society understands violence as those acts which cause a significant amount of harm or destruction. However, this is also not the case. Many acts-again, like war and capital punishment-inflict an enormous amount of physical harm and are deemed to be nonviolent by law and the majority of the American population. Thus it can be shown that our societal understanding of violence can not be understood by logical reasoning. Specific acts, for whatever reason, are forbidden. The individual does not understand this.

As a result of this confusion, individuals often commit acts that are understood to be violent by the society. This confusion can account for at least some acts of
nonnormative violence, demonstrating that a subjective understanding of violence makes nonnormative violence more likely to occur.

For whatever reason, our society has declared the physical harm of an exorcism impermissible. Thus, it is both violent and impermissible. However, for the individual, there are actually innumerable factors to consider when seeking to understand how an exorcism which utilizes physical harm should be defined.

If the subject of the exorcism is also unopposed to the use of physical harm and does not describe the acts as violent, how should such an act be described? For all those in attendance, it will be understood as nonviolent. If the act enjoys the consent of all involved should it then be described as nonviolent?

There are two sociological theories one can utilize in the quest to better understand such a situation. The first is the theory of cultural relativism. Primarily used by anthropologists, cultural relativism holds that there are no transcendent principles or absolute values that transcend cultures. There are no values that retain absolute truth; therefore, no value is more legitimate than any other.

The various groups involved in exorcisms could certainly be considered as a distinct culture. Such persons hold strong convictions, possess a distinct worldview, and assign particular meaning to acts. Thus, one could use the concepts of cultural relativism when seeking to understand how to define the physical harm of an exorcism.

Under the theory of cultural relativism, one examines the respective values of different cultures by granting each its due dignity. Thus, according to the theory of cultural relativism the act of an exorcism would be examined in the same manner as would the actions of an intervening state. Both spring from particular understandings of
the world—neither of which is superior to the other; further, both find particular and distinct values in the respective acts that each performs in such circumstances.

Thus, to address the above situation, cultural relativism theory would not say that the actions of those involved in the exorcism were illegitimate. It has no basis for doing so. Instead, it would seek to understand the particular meaning that such persons have assigned to their actions.

This theory would additionally assert that “one must understand the uniqueness of each culture, the uninterpretability of any culture apart from its cultural context, and the unlikely validity of every simple notion regarding cultural human nature” (Herskovits 1972: 2). Thus, to understand the values of a culture one must understand the cultural context from which such values arose. Therefore, it is necessary for one to understand the cultural context from which exorcisms have developed if one is to be capable of understanding how the participating individuals understand the phenomenon. For example, one would need to understand that the physical harm of the exorcism was perceived to be perpetrated against the demon, not the individual. It is the demon, which is evil incarnated, that must be destroyed.

Thus, under the guidance of cultural relativity, one would not seek to describe the act of an exorcism from their own particular viewpoint, imposing and assigning their own view to the act. Rather, they would seek to understand the act from the point of view of those involved. Thus, if the act was perceived by all involved as a nonviolent act, it is then a nonviolent act. From the viewpoint of cultural relativity, there is no other way to understand it.
The second theory that could assist our thinking about the above example was developed by sociologists Dorothy and W.I. Thomas. Termed “definition of the situation,” this theory states that when a situation is defined as real, it becomes real in its consequences. Thus, the way a situation is defined determines the consequences of that situation. Therefore, an exorcism of willing participants will ensue with quite a different atmosphere than one where the subject of the exorcism is an unwilling participant, though the level of violence is identical.

Thus, if all the participants define an exorcism as nonviolent, the situation will perform as a nonviolent event. Because there are no inherently violent acts, but instead only acts which are assigned violent descriptions, when the designation of violence is absent, the situation will lack in violence’s incidental results.

According to the theory of the definition of the situation, an act which has been defined as nonviolent will function as any nonviolent act, lacking the consequences of a violent act. Therefore, where there is a genuine consensus among participants about an exorcism’s lack of violence, they will have created what will functionally be a nonviolent act. Thus, the implications for how our society defines violence are substantial.

To further demonstrate the difficulty of defining violence in the absence of a clear and practical definition, let’s explore another example. How should an exorcism be defined if the individual who is being exorcised is an unwilling participant? “The investigation that may lead to an exorcism usually begins because the person is brought to the notice of Church authorities by family or friends. ...Only rarely does a possessed person come forward spontaneously” (Martin 1976: 10). In fact, the extensive resistance that the “demon-possessed” exhibit is often explained as the resistance of the demon, not
the individuals themselves. Thus, even when the individual is resisting and pleading for
the exorcism to end, other participants still believe that the individual needs the exorcism
to occur and thus, can still view the act as one which is not violent.

If this is the case, whose view should be taken into account? Is an action,
motivated by good will, always justifiable? In what way should an act be defined if the
perpetrator defines their actions nonviolently but the victim believes an obvious violence
is occurring? Such incidents are abundant, occurring in the relationships of nations to
other nations, of the state to individuals, of individuals to other individuals, etc. In the
case of an exorcism, how much weight should be given to the “demon-possessed?” If
the target of the exorcism believes the act to be excessive, unjust, and thus, violent,
should it then be described in these terms? Should the acted-upon be given the power to
decide whether an act is violent? Thus, the complexities are revealed.

Why can an exorcism be viewed as nonviolent by some people? Are such people
merely mistaken or unable to understand the definition of violence? Or, is their
understanding a logical application of our society’s obscure understanding of violence? I
would argue that it is the latter. Because there is no concrete and usable definition of
violence, the justifiers of exorcism are free to define violence in accordance to their
worldview.

It is not the case that those participating in the exorcism were unable to
comprehend our definition of violence. Rather, the reality is that our definition of
violence is so subjective that one cannot even make a clear and convincing argument that
an exorcism is a definitively violent act.
The interpretation of violence cannot be contained. Rarely can it be said, “The boundaries of violence don’t allow for that interpretation.” One cannot say with regard to physical violence, “Any act of physical harm which ____ is impermissible.” It is the word “any” which cannot be used with regard to our understanding physical violence. And it is precisely the lack of this word that creates much of the confusion.

The illogical nature of a moral understanding of violence can be understood in terms of postmodern sociological thought. Social theorist, Zygmunt Bauman, explores a postmodern view of ethics and finds that moral phenomena are not regular or repetitive, morality is inherently burdened with contradictions, and is irrational (Ritzer 2003: 247).

Thus, a subjective understanding of violence creates violence to be a phenomenon that can only be defined in context and by the subsequent interpretation of that context. Unfortunately, understanding of context varies, creating an astonishing confusion about how acts should be defined. Violence, devoid of a practical definition, becomes ultimately subjective.

Perhaps our societal understanding of violence is better understood by the term “socially acceptable.” It appears that acts are deemed violent on no other basis than whether they are socially sanctioned or condemned. We do not define violence on the basis of acts, but rather, on how our society reacts to these acts. However, socially acceptable acts are always being redefined and thus cannot be understood to be logical or objectively definable. Acts which are acceptable today were not in the past and there is a possibility that they will not be in the future. Thus, identical acts can be deemed both as violent and non-violent on the basis of societal approval and disapproval.
Consequently, this understanding of violence is also quite fluid and does not create violence to be a definitive phenomenon. Thus, it does not provide any hint as to why some acts are socially approved while others are condemned, nor why socially condemned acts of physical harm continue to be so prevalent. Nevertheless, this understanding, though wholly inadequate and subjective, at least affords some sort of criteria by which to understand why our society identifies some acts as violent and not others. Thus, our functional understanding of violence could be defined as: “Physical harm which is socially condemned.”

Violence, as defined subjectively, can never hope to be understood, for we can scarcely identify it. If only for the purpose of study, violence should be defined according to different criteria. Rather than a subjective definition, I suggest that violence be defined objectively—that is, be definable by actions. The objective definition that I have chosen for this paper defines violence as follows: Violence is the purposeful infliction of physical harm on another human being. Thus, physical harm can be employed either as a means to an end-positive or negative—or an end in itself. This definition eliminates motivation but makes harm intentional—that is, the perpetrator is fully aware that their actions will result in physical harm, but chooses to employ them regardless.

It might be argued that the physical harm which is deemed to constitute violence under an objective definition should be harm which is substantial. However, such a clarification would face the same obstacles of subjectivity. Who will determine what should constitute substantial? It will be indistinctly determined by society and
subsequently, independently defined by the individual. Thus, it will be determined in numerous ways.

Further, such an argument is inaccurate, as was previously explored. Many acts that did not exact substantial harm were deemed to be violent under a subjective definition, while some which did exact substantial harm were not deemed to be violent.

In contrast, an objective definition creates clear boundaries by which to understand the phenomenon, while also allowing that purposeful physical harm be examined as a distinct and concrete phenomenon. This allows an observer the possibility of evaluating the purpose of physical harm, how it functions, and why it is justified in some cases and condemned in others.

Under an objective definition of violence, the number of acts that constitute violence grows considerably. Controversial acts such as spanking, the death penalty, and war must now be considered violent and will be examined in conjunction with acts of murder, rape, and spousal abuse. Further, acts which have typically not been considered violent must now be examined under this classification. Such acts include sports such as boxing, male circumcision, masochism, and police killings, to name a few.

The benefits of studying objectively defined violence are numerous. An objective definition of violence allows for the realization that our society constantly utilizes acts of purposeful physical harm. If we begin to understand that acts of physical harm are identical in terms of actions, we will then realize that our society reacts differently to identical actions. The action is the same; it is the reaction that varies. When this is recognized we can begin to pursue and examine the basis of our reactions, searching for distinctions in the way our society defines violence. What are the factors that determine
how our society defines violence? Are these factors consistent and logical or are they arbitrary and subjective? Is there a consistent underlying basis by which violence is defined?

Further, such a comprehensive examination of violence could grant greater understanding as to the objective features of physical harm, creating the possibility that a decreased number of violent acts will be sanctioned by our society. When a society frames a subject in new terms, it can begin to evaluate that subject differently. Thus, a new evaluation of violence could result in a decreased dependence upon it.

Objectively defined violence becomes a sociological question. If violence were studied as an objective phenomenon, free from the subjectivity of the individual, sociologists could examine both the objective reality of violence—the way it is utilized by, and functions in, our society—and the subjective meaning that both the individual and society assign to acts of violence:

The confinement of research to those injurious actions that are socially deviant truncates and distorts the observed variance in violence. It pushes aside important questions about historical and cultural variation in the criminalization of specific violent acts and it subverts any attempt to understand why certain forms of violence are tolerated, accepted, endorsed, mandated, or glorified, while others are repudiated or even excoriated (Jackman 2000).

Further, research could examine the functions and impact of these designations. For example, sociologists could examine whether the existence of socially sanctioned violence has a correlative effect on the existence of nonnormative violence. Sociologists could also examine the reasons that some acts are deemed violent while others are not. For example, are acts that are socially proscribed deemed as such because they are dysfunctional for the society?
Finally, sociologists could explore the impact that a subjective definition of violence has had on our society by researching some of the following hypotheses:

1. A subjective definition of violence has made physical harm a permissible phenomenon in our society.

2. Once physical harm becomes an acceptable phenomenon, sanctioned violence is more likely to occur.

3. A subjective definition of violence socializes us to accept physical harm as a way to achieve our ends. This utilitarian understanding of physical harm socializes us to use violence and thus, be violent.

We have yet to understand the pervasiveness of socially proscribed violence. “The real-life problem begins with the fact that we all believe in violence, if actions speak louder than words” (Somerville 241). Many explanations have endeavored to explain the undesirable persistence of this form of violence. Many thinkers including social scientists, theologians, and biologists have proposed numerous theories to account for the continual existence of nonnormative violence. These theories include the notion of man’s fallen nature, the belief in the innate aggressiveness of human beings, and conflict theory. However, no explanation has yet to offer a feasible solution by which to control or end nonnormative violence. In fact, two are utterly fatalistic, essentially stating that violence will always be a part of human existence. Perhaps nonnormative violence could be better understood if examined in conjunction with its twin: socially sanctioned violence.
The function of socially sanctioned violence has yet to be understood. On a basic level, socially sanctioned violence is a class of physical harm that is permitted to exist for the purpose of achieving certain functions. For example, police are permitted to use violence to control those who break the laws of the state. Thus, socially sanctioned violence is understood to be an effective way of achieving certain desired ends.

It is likely that those who are constant witnesses to the effectiveness of socially sanctioned violence comprehend the effectiveness of utilizing physical harm to achieve particular ends. The awareness of physical harm as a functional method almost certainly creates an increased devotion to it as a strategy-both in its sanctioned and proscribed forms. In other words, the functionality of socially sanctioned violence could have a corresponding effect on the existence of nonnormative violence.

Michael Moore presents a similar explanation in the documentary *Bowling for Columbine* (2002). He suggests that the nonnormative violence of Columbine might have been influenced by the socially sanctioned violence to which the young perpetrators were continuously exposed. Moore’s examples of such influential socially sanctioned violence were both the location of Lockheed Martin, the world’s largest weapons manufacturer, near the young perpetrators’ community and the bombing of Kosovo, as ordered by President Clinton. Moore believed that an exposure to these forms of socially sanctioned violence could have had a significant impact on the young men, as each confirmed that violence is a functional way to end conflicts. Thus, Moore suggested that exposure to socially sanctioned violence could be a factor in the existence of socially condemned violence.
Moore proposed this theory in response to critics who blamed the culpability of
Columbine on the young men’s exposure to forms of condemned violence in movies,
video games, and music. Such critics believe that a heightened exposure to condemned
forms of violence could have an analogous influence on the existence of condemned
violence. This theory has had a wide following. Even
Congress has threatened to get involved with the entertainment industry. ...Since the
1950s, the apparent impact on children of rising levels of television violence has
periodically spawned congressional calls for regulation, more responsible programming,
and academic studies" (Marks 1995:1).

Many studies have examined the relationship between the exposure to condemned
violence and its existence in society. The preponderance of research has linked acts such
as viewing TV violence to increases in aggression (Marks 1995:1), demonstrating that an
exposure to socially proscribed violence does, in fact, impact its existence.

While such a premise seems to be accurate, it does not account for many acts of
violence. Most of the research examining violence has tended to focus exclusively on
socially proscribed violence. However, we must also examine the possibility that an
exposure to socially sanctioned forms of violence has an equal, or possibly greater,
correlative effect on the existence of nonnormative violence than exposure to proscribed
violence.

In fact, some studies already demonstrate a relationship between socially
sanctioned violence and the existence of socially proscribed violence. For instance,
research demonstrates that spanking has an effect on the propensity toward violence.
"New research that examines all the studies done on spanking over the past six decades
concludes that children who are regularly spanked are more prone to aggression,
antisocial behavior and abuse of their own children or spouse later in life” (ABC 2002).
In fact, research published in the Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescents Medicine concluded by saying that the “reduction or elimination of corporal punishment could have major benefits for reducing antisocial behavior in the society” (Straus, Sugarman, and Giles-Sims 1997). Thus, the existence of at least some forms of socially sanctioned violence appear to have an effect on the level of nonnormative violence.

The research examining socially sanctioned violence has been both insufficient and insubstantial. Socially sanctioned violence is an invisible phenomenon whose presence is often assumed to be necessary. It is often believed that socially sanctioned violence exists only as a response to violence that is socially condemned. However, this relationship has not been sufficiently examined, and thus, such an assumption could be quite incorrect.

We have yet to understand the functions that socially sanctioned violence performs. Do they provide a measure of control, are they used to teach and correct, are they used as a form of entertainment, or do they function to protect? Further, in what ways does our society react to these forms of intentional physical harm? Before we can understand the reasons for our society’s relationship to socially condemned violence, we must understand how our society reacts to socially sanctioned forms of violence.

Defining violence objectively raises many new questions to be answered, factors to examine, and relationships to dissect. However, I cannot undertake a complete investigation of these manifold topics in this paper. Rather, I will investigate one of the hypotheses proposed earlier for the study of objectively defined violence. This hypothesis states that once physical harm becomes an acceptable phenomenon, socially
sanctioned violence is more likely to occur. I will examine this hypothesis with regard to its effect on our society and our state.

As explored earlier, the subjective understanding of violence is blurry at best. However, if anything can be gleaned from an investigation of this phenomenon it is the following: A subjective definition of violence regards at least some acts of physical harm to be permissible.

Though it would seem that the permissibility of some acts of physical harm would not necessarily have a significant effect on our society, I would suggest that the opposite is true. Our understanding of physical harm as both permissible and functional has assisted in creating a society that employs many acts of physical harm on an interpersonal level. Physical harm is a prevalent phenomenon in our society: “Violent actions are a normal part of the human repertoire of strategic social behaviors. Violence incorporates a diverse array of actions that are an integral feature of social life” (Jackman 2000).

Individuals constantly employ and subject themselves to physical harm for such diverse purposes as punishment, entertainment and health. I would suggest that such a constant and voluntary utilization of violence has an extensive effect on the way our society understands this phenomenon and creates a psychological appreciation of physical harm.

Rather than being opposed to acts which purposely inflict harm on another human being, we accept the reality and the functionality of physical harm, appreciating the benefits it produces. In fact, when studying violence as defined objectively one realizes the multitude of violent acts which are constantly employed in our society. It could be said, in fact, that our society is inundated with violent acts. Not only do we employ
violence as a means to punish, control, protect, and teach, but we constantly subject
ourselves to physical harm. There are numerous acts of violence which we consistently
celebrate, perform, uphold. We have been taught on countless occasions to watch the
actual pain and physical harming of another person, and to justify it, enjoy it, even cheer
for it.

Many medical practices intentionally inflict physical harm on the bodies of
patients, with doctors and dentists both utilizing physical harm as a component of their
profession. Dentists cause physical harm to their patients in order to clean teeth, fill
cavities, and strengthen gums. For example, though flossing regularly causes physical
harm to the sensitive or unhealthy gums of some individuals, it continues to be
energetically recommended by dentists. Thus, this physical harm is believed to be
necessary as it will eventually be beneficial when it serves to produce healthy gums.
Though most dentists only cause as much physical harm as is absolutely necessary,
physical harm continues to be routinely experienced by dental patients.

Doctors consistently utilize a wide range of procedures to foster their patients’
health which incorporate physical harm. These procedures are used both to prevent and
destroy illnesses. Patients are given inoculations to protect their bodies against viruses
and are given medications-such as chemotherapy-which often result in the physical
harming of their body. Further, patients undergo painful examinations such as pap
smears and colonoscopies to ensure that their bodies are functioning properly.

Though they consistently cause physical harm, these procedures are never
categorized as violence. However, when medical practitioners stray outside the socially
permissible boundaries of regular medical procedures, causing unacceptable levels of
physical harm, such actions will be described as violence. In these cases, the harm is not a means to an end; thus, the physical harm will be the focus. However, when physical harm stays within the routine and acceptable boundaries, it is seen as simply a means to a desirable end and thus, is not the focus. This physical harm is not considered violent.

Here, it is important to examine the concepts of physical pain and physical harm. Physical pain is the body’s way of reacting to harm which has been perpetrated. Thus, physical pain is a definitive indicator that physical harm has been inflicted on some part of the body. Though the harm may, in fact, serve to eventually benefit the body, physical harm has still occurred. Thus, whether this physical harm is used as a means to an end or an end in itself is not a relevant factor in categorizing an act as objectively violent.

Further, it is not the case that all medical practices are viewed with amoral neutrality. Abortion and euthanasia are two such medical practices which are controversial precisely because there is disagreement as to whether they constitute violence. Abortion, though legal, continues to enjoy the presence of a dedicated opposition. This opposition is grounded on the belief that the killing of a fetus is an impermissible act of violence.

Euthanasia, on the other hand, continues to be an illegal practice in every state in America, regarded under the category of homicide. Thus, this medical practice is currently believed to be a form of violence, comparable to murder. However, many states have introduced legislature on the issue, with some states nearly legalizing the practice. In fact, euthanasia was legalized in Oregon in 1994, only to be overturned in 1997 (Legal 2003). There is a reasonable chance that this medical practice will one day
be legalized in the United States. Thus, medical practices are also assigned meaning. They are not inherently violent or nonviolent.

Individuals also undergo physical harm for beauty purposes, submitting to such acts as body piercing and plastic surgery on the expectation that there will be positive results. The necessary recovery time for these procedures is anywhere from a few hours to several weeks as the body’s skin and muscle recovers from being cut or punctured.

Thus, individuals willingly undergo the physical harm of routine medical practices for the benefits they expect will result. We willingly undergo such diverse and painful procedures as teeth cleaning and chemotherapy for the sake of our health. To achieve health, aspects of physical harm cannot be avoided and are therefore voluntarily undergone.

Thus, humans are rational actors who make use of certain means in their quest to attain specific goals. This is the premise of exchange theory, rational choice theory, and Max Weber’s theories on the types of rationality (Ritzer 2003: 26-28, 160-169). Such theories explore the extent of human rationality in regard to its effect on the actions we choose. Each theory states that human beings seek to determine the most efficient means to achieve their desired end before choosing an action. The most efficient means will be chosen.

However, many factors will effect how one determines which means are the most efficient. For example, James S. Coleman explained that the chances of achieving one’s end will affect the choices we make, when he expounded on his theory of rational choice. (Ritzer 2003: 167) Therefore, an individual who is deciding whether to use chemotherapy
as a means to cure their disease will assess the chances for success. If it is determined that success is negligible, the individual will likely choose against chemotherapy.

Further, humans assess the cost and profit of the actions. This distinction was developed by George Homans, in his contribution to exchange theory (Ritzer 2003: 165). Thus, a particular mean will not be determined to be the most efficient end if the costs, or negative effects, of that mean are considerable. Therefore, if chemotherapy will be so destructive to the body that the individual will no longer be able to enjoy their life, they will determine that the costs of chemotherapy outweigh their profits and will choose not to undergo this form of treatment.

Therefore, it can be determined that human beings are extremely rational about the means they choose to achieve certain ends. Thus, the fact that we consistently prefer to use procedures which utilize physical harm demonstrates that we have determined that the use of physical harm is the best way to achieve our desired end. This demonstrates that physical harm is understood to be both a necessity and a provider of positive functions.

The inclusion of these unorthodox and surprising examples is perhaps galling to some readers. How can the inclusion of medical practices be beneficial to a study of violence? That is a question that must be examined. Whether or not we consider these acts to be violent, the fact is that under an objective definition of violence, they must be included. This is significant.

We must focus on the function of these acts, while also considering their assigned meaning and our society’s reaction to them. We must compare these sanctioned
procedures with nonnormative acts such as murder. And we must study the effects that the permissibility of physical harm has on society.

The inclusion of physical harm as present in medical practices will assist in the examination, and subsequent understanding of, the mentality that we have about physical harm. The reality is that we understand that positive benefits can result from the use of physical harm. This is important, imperative, to understand.

This reality can be further expanded when we examine the phenomenon of self-inflicted physical harm, as present in masochism and suicides. Such harm has been determined to be beneficial by the individual. Thus, we must begin to understand the extent to which physical harm is regarded to have beneficial purposes.

Our society also procures a certain amount of entertainment from the violence of sporting events. Violence is typically a controlled event within the confines of sport-and an extremely popular component. Boxing is a sport which is based on physical harm, albeit controlled. It is almost certain that the spectators of a boxing match will not suddenly find themselves witness to an uncontrollable brawl. However, it is equally clear that the two participating fighters are causing injuries to each other. Each head snapped back by a powerful punch, each open wound, each bruise, makes this obvious. The spectators, in fact, encourage violence, calling for harder punches—greater physical harm—and cheering as one fighter falls beaten, in pain and exhaustion, and physically unable to rise.

Team sports such as baseball, basketball, football and hockey, while not based on physical harm, frequently incorporate it in their repertoire. In these sports, players commonly participate in seemingly uncontrollable brawls. As the injuries attained from
such fights rarely result in serious, if at all significant, injuries, spectators likely realize
that such actions more an act of communal posturing than uncontrolled violence.
However, in these instances the violence is absolutely unnecessary, having nothing to do
with the sport itself.

Yet rather than calling for its end, we revel in it: “the NHL relies on physical play
and fights to add drama and excitement...[some fans] say they no longer would pay
attention to the sport if fighting were banned” (Vest 2004). This account of the fan
approval of hockey violence was conveyed after the occurrence of a particularly injurious
fight. During this extracurricular fight, one player “lay motionless on the ice with a
broken neck after being sucker-punched” by another player (Vest 2004). However, in
spite of this event, fans have declared their opposition to the termination of hockey
violence. Thus, fans do not only find entertainment in the illusion of violence; rather,
even serious injuries are a source of pleasure for many fans. Indeed, rare is the instance
when someone is offended by, or calls for an end to violence in sports.

Thus, many in our society have, on countless occasions, watched the actual pain
and physical harming of another person and justified it, enjoyed it, even cheered for it.
The physical harming of another person, in these circumstances, is a tremendously
popular form of entertainment. In our contemporary society such injurious actions are
permissible, even enjoyed, within the confines of sport.

We seem to understand, accept, and believe that some forms of physical harm are
necessary, important, and acceptable. Rather than being opposed to acts of physical
harm, we regularly utilize them, making them an intricate part of our lives. Thus, we
believe in the redeeming value of physical harm, appreciating its functionality as a means
to an end. It is reasonable to believe that such an appreciation for physical violence has a significant influence on the existence of nonnormative violence.

We allow an enormous amount of acts of physical harm. Not only are numerous acts of physical harm permitted, but those which are condemned are done so on an inconsistent basis. Therefore, even those acts which fall under the category of violence are only regarded as violent in particular circumstances. Thus, society is inundated with acts of physical harm. They are a part of everyday life. They are so prevalent that one begins to wonder whether our society functions on the basis of physical harm.

In fact, we allow so many acts of physical harm that the question must be asked as to whether our society permits more acts of physical harm than it proscribes. Whether this statement is accurate can only be determined by studying violence as an objective phenomenon.

Proscribed violence is often considered to be an anomaly by our society because the society perceives the physical harm of these acts. Thus, proscribed violence is considered an anomaly because it utilizes physical harm. However, the harm of proscribed violence is only visible to the society precisely because it is condemned. The physical harm that comprises socially sanctioned violence tends to remain strikingly invisible to our society. This violence is acceptable and thus, not the focus.

In contrast, I would suggest that proscribed violence is an anomaly, but that is such for an entirely contrary reason. Nonnormative acts of physical harm are the anomaly because they are acts of physical harm which are impermissible. Our society allows so many acts of physical harm that it is unusual for any to be condemned. Thus, those acts of physical harm which the society has condemned are the rarity.
The question then arises as to why these acts are proscribed. Are they deemed as such on the basis of their functionality for the society? In other words, do these acts threaten the stability of our society? To discover the basis by which acts are proscribed, we must compare such proscribed acts with similar or identical acts which are permissible. Rather than study violence as it has been defined, we must rather investigate why it is defined as it is.

Next, one must investigate the effect that a subjective definition of violence has had on the way the state functions. By making physical harm a permissible phenomenon, such a definition allows the state to employ objectively defined violence. However, this is often difficult for individuals to comprehend as the state is usually believed to be a neutral and invisible actor:

The state is made to appear as something invisible behind what is visible. Many jurists, political scientists, and philosophers have described it as an invisible, unchanging entity that somehow invisibly and intangibly exercises power over its subjects or citizens. Most jurists have named this power ‘sovereignty:’ the property of absolute, unlimited, amoral control over the subjects (Goresky 1974: 165).

Whereas individuals can be vengeful and hostile, the state is often perceived to be carrying out its functions with an impartial purpose. When tangibly operating in society the state is perceived to be merely normalizing unstable relationships and thus, is often believed to be a nonviolent entity, almost transcendental in nature. Consequently the actions of the state, when performed within acceptable boundaries, are believed to be both legitimate and nonviolent.

However, when examining violence as it is objectively defined, one finds that the state regularly employs violence in its quest for self-maintenance and order. In fact, many suggest that the state is defined by its position as the only entity which possesses the legitimate right to employ violence. Classical sociologist Max Weber was one of the
first proponents of this view. Thus, many assert that the state is defined by its monopoly of violence:

State structures and practices are the cumulative effect of a social contract in which the public has ostensibly agreed that the state has a monopoly on force, and therefore it and only it can legitimately constrain and coerce people. ...Legitimacy is always a central concern in the sense that violence is only violence by definition if the perpetrators fail to establish the legitimacy of their acts against claims of others that it is illegitimate (Nagengast 1994: 115).

Consequently, individuals relinquish their personal claim to the legitimate use of violence, giving such power to the state. Thus, the state is understood by the individual as an entity which possesses the ability to employ violence impartially, and thus, justly. Possessing this legitimacy, the state is able to utilize violence rather frequently.

Perhaps our society could be understood as an entity which is “based on the delegation of personal rights to violence to the impersonal agencies of the state on the expectation that they will intervene to protect the individuals from violence or harm” (Robinson 1995). Such a notion proposes that individuals concede their personal claim to violence because they expect the state to work violently on their behalf. Therefore, the dependence or need for violence has not decreased; rather, the proprietor of such violence has shifted.

It is interesting to note that when the state employs this violence to maintain order, it ceases to be regarded as nonnormative. A man who finds and kills the man who has killed his daughter will be understood to be committing an act of violence whereas when the state finds and eventually executes the same killer, the act will be regarded as nonviolent. The state’s violence is understood to be legitimate force; therefore, the state is permitted to ensure order with its utilization.
Acts are not inherently violent; rather they are assigned meaning. Therefore, the society has defined the legitimacy of violence in this manner. The state is understood to be the legitimate proprietor of violence for no other reason than this: The society has determined that it is the state’s domain to ensure order and has granted the state the power to use violence in its effort. Indeed, “social order is made to depend upon the belief in social order” (Nagengast 1994: 116).

However, the state is not wholly autonomous and unrestrained. It also must stay within the confines of certain boundaries; therefore, when the state transgresses the boundaries of what has been deemed to be legitimate violence, its actions become illegitimate. In such instances, these acts will be deemed violent by the society. Instances of illegitimate state violence are acts such as police brutality, the torture of prisoners, and the mistreatment of unarmed persons.

Such a distinction is important to pursue. For, by what basis are such acts distinguished? To discover this, one must realize that the motivations behind legal and illegal state actions are often identical. Thus, state actions are not legitimate on the sole basis of their motivation. By examining the system that our society has developed, it is clear that we believe some people’s motivations are superior to others in their legitimacy. For example, a police officer who observes a man raping a woman and then beats this man does so with the same desire to punish the perpetrator as the judge who eventually sentences such a person to prison.

One might then suggest that these distinctions are made by considering the method of punishment. However, this is an unrealistic assumption when one recognizes that a police officer who witnesses (thus, being certain of guilt) the act of a man beating a
child to death and then chooses to kill the man, could be meting out the same punishment as the state when it eventually executes such a person. Why then, is it illegitimate for a police officer, who is an arm of the state, to punish a proven criminal?

It is likely that such ideas concerning legitimacy are simply an extension of our view about the legitimacy of the state. The state, while being made up of individuals like police officers and judges, is greater than them. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Thus, when a person is convicted after being granted representation by a lawyer and a hearing by a judge, the punishment comes as a result of the functioning of the state and will therefore be regarded to be just. A police officer, though an arm of the state, is still an individual. The same is true of the judge.

However, when these various components work together, they become part of the system of the state. Thus, what develops is no longer the work of individuals, but the decision of the state. Because such individuals labor together under the guidance of the law, it is the law that is being orchestrated, not the will of the individuals. Thus, the law and state are given a transcendental quality and its violence is legitimate. Though made up of individuals and only able to function under their power, the law guides such individuals and becomes greater than them. Therefore, when those individuals who ensure the order of the state stray outside these boundaries, they are simply individuals and their violence, illegitimate. Thus, legitimate violence by the state must be both obedient to the laws of the state and enforced by that state’s system of justice.

Therefore, on a superficial level these acts are distinguished on the basis of their legality or perceived morality. However, such an understanding is somewhat capricious when one recognizes that an understanding of legality and morality are developed
concepts. Moral and legal notions have been chosen and created. As has been frequently stated in this paper, the reality is that actions do not have inherent meaning but are rather assigned value. Thus, we must investigate the reasons that we have chosen to understand these acts in such ways. Are acts regarded to be legal or moral on the basis of their functionality, their potential for dysfunctionality, or their constructive potentiality?

Functions and dysfunctions are important concepts to pursue. Functionalist sociologists view society as “an integrated system of functionally related parts…societies have a life of their own and their survival demands that particular needs of the system have to be met.” (Farganis 2000: 225). Thus, functionality of the structures of society—such as the law, educational system, and economy—have an impact on each other (Ritzer 2003: 76).

If the state was unable to control the actions of its members, it would be unable to function. Thus, if law enforcement did not quell the interpersonal violence of the citizenry, the citizens would be less efficient in their activities. If citizens did not feel safe, they would do fewer activities outside their home, eating out and watching movies less frequently. This would effect on the economy, which would suffer. Thus, the functionality of law enforcement affects the functionality of other components of the society.

Further, if individuals believed that the state was illegitimately interfering in their lives, faith in the institution of the state would diminish, producing negative effects for other structures of the society. Therefore, the reason that certain acts have become determined to be illegal could be because the legality of these acts would have a negative effect on the way society functions.
On the other hand, we must not be too hasty in determining that the presence of such laws is a determinant of their functionality. For, such entities could be dysfunctional for the society. A dysfunction is defined by Robert K. Merton as a “structure or institution which has negative consequences” for the maintenance of other structures (Ritzer 2003: 92). Thus, though a law is legal, its impact on society could be negative, or dysfunctional. We must study these laws and their effects to determine whether their existence is functional or dysfunctional for our society.

Regardless of the distinctions between legal and illegal state violence, it is evident that the range of legitimate violence is greater for the state than for the individual. In other words, the state is granted the ability to legitimately utilize more forms of violence than the individual.

The state utilizes physical harm in various ways, domestically utilizing police forces to ensure order. These police forces are licensed by the state to keep order and, if necessary, they are permitted to do this violently.

One citizen, exhorting the merit of individual gun ownership, asked: “If someone breaks into your house, who are you gonna call? The police! Because they have guns! Cut out the middleman!” (Moore 2002). Cognizant that the state is capable of keeping order only because it is the sole entity permitted to use such force, she urged citizenry to take control themselves. Thus, this woman did not accept the restrictive boundaries of legitimate violence for the individual, believing instead that the individual should be given greater capacity to protect themselves-e.g. the freedom to use violence-and the state, less.
The state operates by the recognition of certain laws. Were individuals allowed the freedom to transgress laws whenever they desired, the state would be unable to function. Thus, the state functions on the understanding that those who transgress its laws will be punished. However to be effective, such punishments must include the possibility of violence. If the state is to function, the police must have the ability to force people to either obey the laws or imprison those that refuse. To force violent persons to cease noncompliance, the police must be allowed the possibility to use violence.

If our state were to simply cease allowing police to employ violence, making no other changes in the way it functions, there is no doubt that the state would surrender its control. “Even in a democratic society committed to according its members maximum freedom and high respect, it is unlikely that law-enforcement officers can do their job if they are never permitted to use violence” (Audi 1974: 44). Thus, our society can currently maintain itself only through the use of violence. Clearly, the existence of a police force which is licensed to use violence has a substantial impact on the way our society functions.

The realization that the state could not maintain domestic control without the threat and utilization of violence is astonishing. When this is understood, we can begin to evaluate the way our society functions, investigating whether we benefit from such a society and whether we believe that our society should continue to function as it does. However, until violence is understood objectively such questions will likely continue to remain unasked.

If it is determined that we should pursue the existence of a less violent state, the exploration of different ways to create state control could be undertaken. For example,
would it be possible for states to maintain power by employing a predominantly reward-based method of control? It is interesting to note that our state operates on a system which punishes citizens for breaking its laws, but never rewards them for adhering to those laws. Citizens are simply expected to abide by the law and therefore, are not rewarded when they do so; however, they will be punished-sometimes violently-for their disobedience.

A reward-based system whereby individuals were rewarded in a considerable and tangible fashion for obeying the law could serve to encourage individuals to obey laws and thus, reduce the level of crime. At the very least, such positive reinforcement could help to alter the dominant mindset of fear and reprisal to one where citizens know they will be positively compensated for their adherence.

The possibility of finding a functionally feasible system of control that utilizes less physical harm can only be initiated when individuals begin to explore new ways to maintain order in society. Such ideas can only be explored when violence is defined objectively.

If it is decided that the state functions suitably as it now exists, it will be done with a full understanding of both the manner in which it functions and the methods by which it maintains itself. Examination does not necessitate change. It can simply be used as a tool to investigate and better understand the system, which could then be deemed to be satisfying. However, examination is needed for full comprehension. To be able to genuinely advocate for a system, one must know how it functions. Whether change occurs or not, an honest examination will produce the same thing: an informed dominant agreement on the best way for the state to function.
Capital punishment and war are other state-sponsored acts of violence that are employed in the quest of state self-maintenance. Capital punishment has been briefly addressed, but more exploration of its function, methods, assigned meaning, and effect on our understanding of violence must be undertaken to assist our understanding of both the way our state utilizes violence and the way our society, who consents to such methods, understands violence.

I can not explore the phenomenon of war in this paper, though it is a phenomenon which has enormous implications for our understanding of violence. War is violence on a mass scale, comprised of individuals who utilize violence on behalf of the state. The sheer number of individuals involved, combined with this phenomenon’s consistent popularity, make this phenomenon essential to our understanding of physical harm. I strongly advocate further examination of war as an objectively-definable phenomenon. Thus, one must examine the following:

1. How war is utilized: by whom, against whom.
2. How does the society define the phenomenon of war: violent or nonviolent? On what basis?
3. How does the society define specific wars: justifiable or unjustified/violent or nonviolent? By what criteria?
4. How does war function? What methods are used? Under what circumstances are these methods permissible: on a consistent basis or only sanctioned within the confines of the phenomenon of war? By what justifications are these acts permissible or impermissible?
5. What is the impact that the approval of war, a massive employment of physical harm, has on our society’s understanding of physical harm?

When violence is analyzed as an objective phenomenon, the extent to which the state employs violence is understood. Such an approach affords us with the capability to
examine both the methods by which the state employs violence and the extent of the
state’s reliance upon such methods. It is imperative that the state’s utilization of physical
harm and the society’s consent of such a method be examined. The violence of the state
must be divorced from the meanings we assign it—both as impartial and valid—and rather
be investigated as a structure which consistently utilizes physical harm in its quest for
specific ends.

I am not saying that such officially sanctioned violence is unjustified. The point is that it
is violence… Thus, so far as one thinks violence is by definition unjustified and that
what one’s government does is by and large justified, one finds it that much easier to give
a neutral description of what really is extreme violence…. And since the enemy abroad
and violators of the law at home are thought of as not justified, it tends to be they who are
singled out as perpetrators of violence. One can thus easily come to be neither
adequately self-critical nor adequately critical of those it tends to approve of (Audi 1974:
36).

Violence, as objectively defined, is consistently utilized by various sectors of our
society. It is imperative that the violence of the state be included in this examination, for
its impact on society is substantial.

The study of objective violence has important implications for our society.
However, such research must ensure that it includes the least amount of biases. In other
words, an objective study of violence must seek to be objective.

When studying violence as an objective phenomenon, the researcher must be
meticulous in divorcing morality from violence. It is imperative that the researcher be
prudent in the language that she employs to describe actions. This language must give
uniform descriptions to identical acts. The researcher must not adopt the language of the
society, which assigns moral meaning to acts with the words it designates: murder versus
kill, spank versus hit, and abuse versus spank.
Of course, the researcher will clarify her descriptions with words like "very hard," to express intensity. But she must be vigilant in describing the acts as they are actually objectively perceived; she must guard against describing an act according to its subjective designation. In other words, even if an act is morally and socially acceptable, the researcher must continue to describe its objective features, rather than temper these features because of a bias. The study of objective violence must be done objectively if its impact is to be substantial.

Americans are presently quite dissatisfied with the levels of violence in their society, on both the domestic and international level. This dissatisfaction is often only focused on proscribed forms of violence, as many are eager to find ways to decrease its levels. However, the existence of socially proscribed violence might be, in fact, quite inextricably intertwined with that of socially sanctioned violence. If the existence of one impacts the existence of the other, we must inquire as to whether our societies can be restructured in order to produce the least amount of each.

We must begin to explore why both individuals and the society use socially sanctioned and proscribed forms of violence. Is violence, condemned or sanctioned, utilized for the identical purpose of a functional means to a desired end? Is it logical to believe—as we currently do—that our use of socially sanctioned harm as an efficient mean to a desired end does not have a substantial impact on the level of socially proscribed violence?

Socially sanctioned violence is an extremely prevalent part of our lives, on both the societal and state level. Our dependence and consistent utilization of socially
sanctioned violence has enormous potential for providing insight into our views about violence. The evidence of our devotion to socially sanctioned forms of violence makes clear that we believe physical harm to be beneficial, necessary, and desirable. The implications of such beliefs are substantial. If we are ever to understand why our society is so inundated with nonnormative violence, we must begin to understand the reality of our beliefs about physical harm.

We must begin to explore violence as a created concept, probing for the reasons that violence has been defined as it has. For example, are socially sanctioned forms of violence acceptable because they are necessary for the functioning of our society? Or, are socially proscribed forms of violence condemned because they have dysfunctional potential for our society? The likelihood is that the answers to both questions will be quite complicated. However, once we have begun to determine the reasons, we can begin to assess whether such judgments are valid. Thus, the exploration of violence as a created concept provides us with the radical potential to understand our society and, if we desire, to change it.

Investigating violence as determined by actions grants us at least the possibility that we will be able to understand the phenomenon of violence as one which has boundaries, which has a logical basis, and which can be comprehended.

Throughout history, the existence of violence as morally and subjectively defined has been an utterly bewildering mystery. Perhaps it has always been such because we have continually framed the issue incorrectly.
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